

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

December 23, 2005

The Honorable Mike Leavitt
Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Mr. Secretary:

I am writing to share my continuing concern about the impending threat of a flu pandemic and the necessity of a government stockpile of antiviral flu treatment. Although prevention through vaccinations is preferable to treatment through antivirals in the event of a pandemic, many obstacles currently prevent us from stockpiling a vaccine in anticipation of human-to-human transmission of avian influenza. As a result, antivirals are our best option for pandemic preparedness, and I urge you to immediately allocate \$1.8 billion of the monies recently appropriated for pandemic preparedness in the Department of Defense Appropriations Bill for a federal antiviral stockpile.

As you know, avian influenza has infected 138 humans to date, of which approximately one-half have died, amid increasing concerns that the mutating virus may soon be transmissible from human to human. In response to this dire threat, governments are scrambling to protect their citizens from a potential pandemic that could kill millions in this country alone.

Although much of the public's focus has been on vaccines, we know that the logistical challenges associated with mass production of an effective vaccine make a flu vaccine stockpile impossible. Vaccines must be targeted to the precise strain of flu that is being transmitted, take several months to prepare given the current production method using chicken eggs, and are only produced by a limited number of manufacturers. Realistically, they cannot be prepared in advance and will take too long to produce once a pandemic has begun.

This is why many foreign governments have placed orders for antiviral treatments. Public health officials recommend stockpiles large enough for 40% to 50% of the population, which would require the purchase of 100 million courses of treatment in America. To date, however, the United States government has only purchased enough pills to treat two to three million people.

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I am very concerned that the global demand for antivirals has already exceeded manufacturers' ability to produce it. Since Tamiflu, produced by Roche Pharmaceuticals, is the only known effective treatment of avian flu, I have worked closely with Roche to expand their production by sub-licensing their technologies to other manufacturers. Roche has prepared agreements with 12 manufacturers and governments, including two U.S. companies, but cannot enact any of these agreements and begin production until it has received sufficient orders from governments.

I understand that it would take a significant purchase by the U.S. government to justify the investment required to begin production in either of these two U.S. companies. I urge you to immediately place an order for an adequate number of antivirals to trigger the new production that will lead to a stockpile of enough avian flu treatment for 100 million U.S. residents as public health officials recommend. Such an order is anticipated to cost \$1.8 billion or more, so it is crucial that you set aside these funds from the recently-passed Fiscal Year 2006 Department of Defense Appropriations Bill. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,


U.S. Senator Charles Schumer